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The Natural Cycle of Leadership: Practicing Self Sustainability for Leadership Development

Dr. Alex Hope

Introduction

Good morning everyone. My name is Dr Alex Hope and I am here today from Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University where I am senior lecturer in Business Ethics. Here I teach both undergraduate and postgraduate students sustainability, responsible management, ethics etc - in other words how to manage and lead in organisations without destroying the planet, the societies in which they operate and themselves....

I must say it is an absolute pleasure to be here at this wonderfully different conference discussing such critical issues of sustainability, responsibility and wellbeing. I have attended many academic conferences over the last few years but i think this is the first one that I have given an academic conference paper - without powerpoint or similar - and in my shorts.. - but more importantly one that includes yoga, thai chi and meditation alongside conference paper presentations...

But perhaps this is a good illustration of the problem that we are here to discuss. As academics and business practitioners - and that includes the third sector people here - and even perhaps as people in general, we tend to decouple our personal, physical and spiritual well being from our roles as professionals - as leaders, as educators, as business people.

Modern life is such that we are often in a frantic race to achieve a particular goal that we perceive to be the standard of our profession or organisation. In doing so we forget who we are, who we want to be and who we are in fact becoming. As both individual and business leaders, we are not willing or afraid to take the risks necessary to follow our true paths and as a result we often make poor life and work decisions.

What's more, the nature of our traditional, western, business driven organisations, and the defined roles that they prescribe to their leaders have precluded a holistic integration of the environment, economy and society that is essential if business is to engage in socially responsible and sustainability oriented actions.

So then is it any surprise that often decisions made by leaders in organisations, governments and businesses that have huge and significant impacts on society and the natural environment, often seem to be at complete odds with the well-being of humankind, society and the earth on which we live - as well it must be said - their own wellbeing..

So today I would like to share with you some thoughts - ideas that I am working on about how we can combine the lessons we are learning here and elsewhere about the importance of looking after our own wellbeing - learning to Love ourselves - practice mindfulness etc (what I call 'self-sustainability') and research that psychologists such as Daniel Goleman are pioneering on emotional leadership - with a more earth based - nature focussed approach - something I call "Earth Centered" leadership...

But lets back up, and talk about what we know.

We know that the world is facing serious threats from the unsustainable use of resources, from anthropogenic climate change and its impacts, from rising inequality - the gulf between the rich and poor, the haves and the have nots...from the breakdown of society and economy - such as the difficulties faced by the people of Greece as we sit here today. We also know that these threats and problems are complex and multifaceted - that they are the 'wicked problems' that are difficult to comprehend let alone to solve.

Often we hear that business is the root cause of many of these problems - or at least the actions of business organisations go a long way to exacerbating them and contributing to environmental, social and economic problems.

however we cannot decouple the actions of our businesses and organisations from those of ourselves.... business are lead, managed and run by people....it is people that generate value - it is people who create change - it is people who have the capacity and opportunity to change the world. It is worth noting in fact that the root word of "Leadership" is 'Leith' which means to cross the threshold - to let go of the old in order to embrace the new - so 'leadership' is fundamental to any social, economic or environmental transformation.

I am in fact an optimist by nature and so I am optimistic about the role of business in solving big problems - after all the role of business is to create value, bring wealth, improve livelihoods and change the world. There are many ways of course

that this may be achieved however business provides society with a powerful tool through which we may transform the world in which we live either positively or negatively.

The main determinant as to the success or failure of sustainable development then, and the main players in the challenge to eradicate poverty or tackle climate change is US - the leaders of today, the researchers and thinkers that influence the actions of leaders and organisations, and those of us who are educating the leaders of tomorrow..

So how do we become leaders that place wellbeing, sustainability and the environment at the centre of our decision making activities?

We know that effective leadership is the key to successful sustainable development. We also know that leaders are more effective when they lead with purpose, with values and with integrity. So clearly we who can build enduring organizations, motivate their employees to provide superior customer service, and create long-term value for shareholders whilst also maximising social value for their stakeholders and wider society and having a positive and restorative impact on the environment.

In order to lead with purpose, values and integrity, we must connect with our emotions, our feelings and our inner self. Whilst many business leaders find that notion difficult to comprehend, It has long been understood that emotions and feelings experienced at the time of making a decision can have a significant bearing on the outcomes.

When the great philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham first proposed his construct of utility in 1789 - that when faced with an decision, in particular an ethical dilemma, the moral action is the one that maximizes well being or benefits to the majority of people - emotions figured prominently in his theory.

More recently the role of emotions in decision making has become an area of significant interest by both psychologists and economists trying to understand the interaction between cognition and emotion. In studying the decisions of investment bankers, Dowling and Lucey (2005) document how the variations in feeling experienced by every individual influences their decision making and consequently leads to predictable patterns in equity pricing.

The pioneering work of Daniel Goleman on Emotional Intelligence has shown that leaders self awareness, empathy and the ability to build a rapport with others has clear links to their own performance, but perhaps more importantly a leader's emotional style also drives everyone else's moods and behaviors through the neurological process of 'mood cognition'

Stressed, depressed leaders create toxic organisations filled with negativity whereas upbeat, inspirational leaders cultivate employees who are able to embrace and surmount even the toughest challenges.

So then if we are to understand, tackle and solve the multi faceted problems facing society and the environment we need to realise that complex problem solving involves more than just cognitive processes, it includes emotion and motivation. In other words the way in which we solve complex problems is not limited to logical or rational decision making.

OK, so what is the role of natural cycles in all of this...

If we take then the premise that leaders emotional states have a strong bearing on their capacity to make sound decisions and on the emotional states and performance of their employees or team members, we must recognize the fact that our emotional states are not static, that they change monthly - weekly - daily - even minute by minute affected by those around us, by our environment, our hormones, our natural cycles.

In nature, cycles are everywhere. They balance and regulate the Earth and its atmosphere. Animals and plants grow, reproduce, hibernate or pupate in sync with seasonal and lunar cycles.

Humans have cycles too - Absolutely no one is the same all the time - we are all governed by our body's built in basic rest - activity - rest cycles - the 24 hour circadian and 90 minute ultradian rhythms. Then there are the longer infradian rhythms such as menstruation, breeding, tidal and seasonal cycles.

In modern society both men and women are disconnected from their natural cycles yet where you are in this cycle can have a profound effect on our moods, our emotions on our performance and that of our team...

The growing interest in 'mindfulness' - where you concentrate on practicing intentional, accepting and non-judgemental focus on your emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment - has crossed over into business. Studies of mindfulness in a business context have shown that increases in mindfulness are associated with increased creativity and decreased burnout amongst leaders and executives.

However we can go further than that. Once we have learnt to accept and recognise the role of our emotions and the relationship between them, our natural cycles and those of the Earth, we can plan our business and leadership activities so that they coincide with one another...

So what can we learn from observing the natural cycles of the Earth...

In nature everything is governed by cycles and everything is interconnected. Fields such as Biomimicry - an approach to innovation that seeks sustainable solutions to human challenges by emulating nature's time-tested patterns and strategies - and Permaculture - a system of agricultural and social design principles centered around simulating or directly utilizing the patterns and features observed in natural ecosystems - have taught us that emulating and working with natural systems can create products, processes and policies that are better adapted to life over the long term - truly sustainable systems.

This paper represents an initial step in developing what I am calling the 'Earth Centered Leadership' model - an approach that borrows from ecological models and practices such as Biomimicry and Permaculture that recognise the interconnectedness of natural systems and work alongside them - in tune with them and inspired by them - and combines this with what we already know about the role of emotions and hormonal cycles on decision making in business and organisational fields.

Here we can take common leadership competencies and activities such as 'setting vision' 'innovating' and 'risk taking' and map them to a time in our natural cycle where we are more creative and persuasive - Anna Zenga talked about 'courage' and 'vision' being an important determinant of positive sustainable business - there are times when we can be more courageous - when we are in a better place to make courageous decisions...research has shown us that individuals are more creative at certain times of the day, the week, the month even the year - dictated by a combination of hormonal and environmental drivers. If we are in tune with

ourselves - our natural cycles and the Earth's natural cycles we can plan for these activities to take place at the optimum time. The action of visioning and vision implementation can profoundly affect organisational structures and outcomes.

Likewise there is a time when we are better placed to take on complex, analytical tasks - recognizing our peak time - when we are most alert and able to concentrate. In some respects the cycle of Earth Centered Leadership recognises that there is a time to step back to let the land - or decision making activities - lie fallow. There is also a time to plant different seeds - or ideas - so that fruit - or projects - bloom at different times. As the study of ecology shows us, there is strength and resilience in diversification.

So to conclude....

There is a need for leaders who are more in tune with both their own emotions, feelings and those of others, but also in tune with the wider social systems in which we live and work as well as the natural environment which supports us.

In many ways this requires a transformation in the way in which we work, we lead, we think and we act. This component of personal transformation can be viewed as a critical success factor for organisations seeking to align their practices with the principles of sustainability.

By incorporating self awareness, inner resilience and practicing 'self-sustainability' and 'Earth Centered Leadership' leaders are better able to maintain their own inner balance, inspire and motivate their teams, and be better prepared to engage with the complex problems facing business and society in general.

After all, without health and maintenance of the self how can we expect our organisations and business to be healthy, productive and contribute to the wider good?

Comments

- Graham NEF

Communication....

Leaders as whole people with Lives and Vulnerability

Question from JO

- How to communicate at scale - shadow stuff
- Positive leadership in toxic contexts...
- Compassionate organisation

Chris shaw

Respect at them (nature) as others rather than part of us...deep ecology

Word **connection is all around** - creating space - Relationship

Adam

The flow - diet and hormones...

Plant seeds at difference times as a business you will be more resilient...

